Interview with Donna Hersey Sandin

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DONNA HERSEY SANDIN

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

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Q: I'm interviewing Donna Sandin in her office in the State Department on Wednesday, July 11th, 1990, and this is the 30th anniversary of Donna's entrance into the Service, 1960, as Assistant Agricultural Attach# — the first woman ever to hold that job in Europe. And maybe that's a good place to start. I know how you got the job because I read all of your material but why don't you just briefly...

SANDIN: In 1960 I started with the Labor Department working on cost of living surveys, and through a quirk I acquired a job in the Department of Agriculture. A co-worker wanted to go into the Peace Corps instead of taking this offer, so she said, “Why don't you go over and apply. This man wants someone to do price review on Public Law 480, commodities in the Department of Agriculture, and work on farm export pricing. So why don't you go over and try for the job?” Which I did, and I just went along peacefully doing my job there for a couple of years until — Orville Freeman was the Secretary of Agriculture, and he appointed Dorothy Jacobson as his Assistant Secretary for International Affairs. And I later found out that she said, “Why are there no women in the Agriculture Attach#'s service?” which was then a small independent service of maybe 70 officers, something like that. They said there are only maybe two who are qualified. So out of the blue, they approached me with this idea, and I accepted right away and the next thing I knew I was on my way to The Hague. I never found out who the other person was who might have been qualified.

They tried to get quite a lot of press mileage out of this. This was, of course, 1965, and Agriculture did a lot to promote their appointment of a woman in this job.

That sort of thing wouldn't happen now, but that was one of the things...

Q: When were you written up in Mademoiselle Magazine? That must have been earlier when you were in San Francisco?

SANDIN: No, that was later when I was in Caracas, my second post I believe that was, or sometime between the first and second post that article came out.

But that was just one of the things I was asked to help do so Agriculture could promote their progressiveness, because Agriculture was an old southern organization. The men were all from the south. When I had to make a business trip to New York — it was in my domestic job before going overseas — one of my bosses said, “Well now, be careful in the subways. There have been riots there.” It was a time of a lot of demonstrations. He almost didn't let me go; he may even have postponed it. This was the attitude. But it didn't bother me at the time.

Q: You were young and fearless.

SANDIN: I mean it wouldn't bother me that he took that attitude. So I went anyway. I think I had to talk to the grain exporters. I knew nothing about grain exporting, and my job in The Hague was never going to involve that, but I went anyway.

Q: I think you mentioned that you only ran into real resistance from one Dutch man you talked to about tobacco.

SANDIN: There was one time I took a visitor around in The Hague, he went to talk to somebody on tobacco, and I noticed the Dutch fellow sat so he didn't even have to keep me in his field of vision while talking to the other man. That's the only time I really noticed it. In general, people seemed to be very welcoming. One of the things that did happen was

that I spoke Dutch, I had been given good language instruction. Agriculture was impressed with my aptitude for languages that they had found out through testing. They gave me excellent teachers so I know that helped a lot. But I did a variety of things in The Hague.

I never knew what subject I was going to be writing on next. I did a lot of reports, answering a lot of questions, letters, checking up on regulations for chewing gum for the Adams Company, and going to see oranges unloaded in Rotterdam. We had a very nice local employee staff. We had very qualified people. So I think one of my obstacles actually was a woman who had been there for a long time — she wasn't a secretary really, well she probably was the secretary in charge of the agricultural Attach#'s office, but she had accumulated a lot of other responsibilities, some reporting, some agriculture intelligence and I think she probably saw me as a threat. I apparently got along with her but afterwards I'm sure she had some things to say. I never looked for problems. Years later I might find that, “Oh, you so offended her when you did this or that.” But I didn't know that.

Q: You said something — was it in The Hague or was it in Caracas later — where you were told not to type because that would immediately...

SANDIN: Oh, that was something. When I took the agriculture job after leaving the Labor Department, the Agricultural job that eventually led to my going overseas, my boss said, “I don't ever want to see you at the typewriter because if these two senior secretaries find out you can type not only will they give you all kinds of typing to do when we really have a crunch of getting some documents out, but they wanted your job. Both of them felt they were capable of doing it. And I said that was a job that could only be done by someone with a university degree, and somebody should be an economist. But they maintained they could do it quite well, and they really wanted to be considered for the job.” So he said, “I don't want you to do anything to diminish your image as a college educated-professional.”

Q: So you really walked right into some office politics, that you had to handle at a very young age.

SANDIN: It was a small office too, maybe 10-15 men, and some secretaries. We had a definite mission to do, and it was an interesting office and people were always doing things. Nobody was sitting around, there were no incompetents just filling chairs.

Q: It must have been double-edged, that in one way you were a novelty, and they were delighted to have you there. You made good publicity I see from some of the things I've read. But on the other hand, there must have been some of the older entrenched men who took a somewhat dim view...

SANDIN: I'm sure they did. My first boss overseas was very nervous, I realized after I'd already made some goofs. He was very concerned that I not do anything... that I not date the wrong people, that I not act improperly in any way. He filled me in on a lot of the background of diplomatic things that people need to know — how to know who outranks you, and so forth. What to do in presenting calling cards, which I think it was decided I should do, after quite some discussion. They actually had me make formal calls on the embassy wives, like the spouses did.

Q: Yes, because that was unusual for a woman to be in your position.

SANDIN: Right. They had in The Hague one other woman on the diplomatic list and that helped there. Where I ran into more problems, but then I was prepared for it, was when I went to my next post because there I was going to work for an Hispanic American, and he apparently had lobbied hard to get me not assigned to that job. I didn't know that, of course, until I started looking through the files in an effort to...

Q: And, of course, the correspondence...

SANDIN: He had sort of polled every other officer in the Embassy before the assignment was final, especially a woman officer, and she'd said, “It wasn't a good idea to send a woman to this job.” And this was funny because our contacts with the Venezuelan government were quite a few women in a lot of high places. Even our main contact in the

Ministry of Agriculture was a woman. And why that wouldn't have carried some weight... I had no trouble in Caracas although I wasn't there that long.

Unfortunately I wasn't mature enough to realize... to figure out how I could have worked better with this man. I got along fine with him, but we really didn't accomplish much. But what I realized later was that he didn't know how to write well in English because Spanish was his original language. Yet he had all the information which I did not have. If I'd gone in and said, “Look, Carlos, what do we want to say? Tell me this, tell me that and I'll write it up and give it back to you and if you like it, fine.” We would have been great partners, and all the reporting would have gotten done.

Q: But he was too proud to ask.

SANDIN: Well, no, it wasn't that. I'm sure he just didn't perceive this. We didn't have enough time, because he was near the end of his tour. I didn't perceive that that was the way to go. And as much experience as I had, later when I was a wife in Bahia, I had some difficulties because I wasn't sure of myself in the wife job as I would have been now.

Q: Let's go back to Caracas a minute. I noticed that you kept on working after you were married, but that was just for a short time at the end of the tour.

SANDIN: What happened was we had a very short courtship and we got married within a few months of my arrival at post. We got married in March and my husband thought he had at least until the end of the year to go on his Caracas tour. So I said I wanted to keep working, and Agriculture didn't want to lose me either. That position had been vacant before, and they didn't want it vacant again, and also they didn't want to lose me. So the Ambassador had to be consulted to see if I was allowed to work, and he said I could since... (phone interruption)

Q: You were in Caracas and I asked how you kept on working after you were married because that was most unusual at that time.

SANDIN: The Ambassador said, “Well, since your husband isn't in the same agency, in fact not even in the same building, I don't see why you can't work.” But, of course, the Ambassador could have said no, and in those days that would have been the final word.

Q: Who was the Ambassador?

SANDIN: Maurice Bernbaum. Anyway, Agriculture said the way they would get around it was that they would have me as a locally hired American citizen, or something. So that's how they got around it.

There was no lengthy paperwork, everything was taken care of right away, but then I only worked for a few more months because then Bob got assigned to Brazil. So I did work and when my original boss left a new man came, and I took him around to the different officials. I really didn't accomplish much but as I said, I was only there for about eight months in that post. The Venezuelan government was having elections that year so they were inaugurating a lot of new farm projects, so they were glad to trot us out to look at the ribbon cuttings, and to have me go along. I did nicely there, but I really didn't do much reporting, or much agricultural intelligence. I don't know how things could have gone... I certainly wasn't as effective as I was in The Hague. But then we didn't have all the local employees we had in The Hague either.

Q: And the Dutch FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals) are extraordinary.

SANDIN: The Dutch are organized. With their statistics you can get almost anything you want in the way of information. Of course, the businessmen are experienced businessmen, they aren't going to tell you things they don't want you to know but some was intelligence work and I just don't know where we would have started in Venezuela to get the information.

Q: So then when you got to Bahia there was no question of working because there was no Agriculture office at the consulate.

SANDIN: No, there was no Agriculture. Perhaps if we'd gone to Rio, which was still the Embassy, they would have loved to have hired me but I didn't know any Portuguese — well, I knew Spanish. I just don't think I would have done it. I wasn't that keen to continue. I just sort of knew I would give it up eventually. It didn't bother me to give it up.

Q: Tell me. You said you had troubles adjusting as a spouse in Bahia.

SANDIN: Oh, well, we had a very small post. There was another woman officer... see, the troubles were with women... a very aggressive single woman officer in the same agency as my husband, and she had some contacts in Brazil. She had taught English to a lot of people who had been in high positions in government, and she believed she knew how to entertain. She didn't like the way I entertained. She didn't like the fact that I didn't entertain very much. And I could have easily answered her back. She wanted my husband to do more contact work. She under ranked us, so I wasn't worried about this. But I should have been, because later she really torpedoed his whole performance report and everything else.

Q: But your husband outranked her?

SANDIN: He outranked her but she was always around the inspectors when they came through, and she would damn us with faint praise, is what it was. She was an expert at that. I should have known how to deal with her, and nowadays I would know how to deal with her, and she would have just kept quiet, and I would have probably inspired her respect in some ways. But I didn't know how to entertain. My husband is also a shy person, he's not that great on contact work. I entertain successfully enough, but not to her standards, and she felt that entertaining was a great deal of our job. We had a new baby but, of course, we had servants so that was no excuse. The Consul's wife also was a kind

of flashy entertainer. I mean, their act there is still hard to follow 20 years later. So you can see we were between two people who really made a social splash. And in the third year we were there things by then went a lot better because by then I had my little role, we had our own little spheres where we all were successful. In retrospect I realize it would have been great if I had the self confidence that I only gained years later.

Q: But I think in retrospect too that you entertain best in a manner in which you are comfortable.

SANDIN: Right. Of course, this particular woman didn't have any regard for my distinguished background. I probably didn't bring it up enough. Nowadays you would. Because after all, I retired at a GS-13.

Q: That's exactly what you should have done.

SANDIN: By then I was totally in the wife role. I'd completely put my past success behind me, I guess.

Q: And you stayed in... ?

SANDIN: We stayed in Bahia for three or four years, then we came here. Then we went to Montevideo.

Q: And when you were back here you were just taking care of one child or two children.

SANDIN: When I was back here I took care of one child. Then I had another child. I did some freelance writing for a contractor who had a contract with Commerce. So I was working out of my home when I could.

Q: Where did you live then?

SANDIN: We lived in Arlington. My husband was really helpful. As soon as he came home, after dinner he would do the dishes and I would go up and write. The kids were little so I could write during their naps, and later I did send them out once or twice a week to a babysitter. But I had just answered an ad in the newspaper that my husband had found for me, in fact. I found a nice writing job where they liked my work. I could do it all at home. All I had to do was drive to Rockville every now and then to deliver their stuff. So it was ideal. And again I found... all the jobs that I've found have been by chance, really, starting with the Agricultural job. A girl on the desk near me in the Department of Labor knew that I was interested in leaving the Department of Labor after traveling for them for two years. Coming to the home office in Washington, the job was kind of dull, so she suggested me for Agriculture, and I immediately got hired. It's all serendipitous really because in Montevideo we had a nice post there, and I didn't work right away but I did get interested in the commissary that was undergoing a sort of overhaul, and I dived right in and determined what products were selling and which weren't, and did a lot of work on that. And some of my actions resulted in the firing of one of the managers so then, of course, everybody wanted me to be the manager but the DCM said, “No way. You helped get her fired so you can't take over the job.” Luckily for me, the woman took the job but the couple was transferred away after a decent interval and then I got the job, which was the most fun job I ever had.

Q: I notice that in Bahia you were a spouse before the 1972 Directive, and you came back to Washington just in the midst of the feminist movement — '72 to '75. And then you went to Montevideo again after the '72 Directive.

SANDIN: Right.

Q: I wonder did that make any difference in...

SANDIN: I wasn't aware that my performance as a wife was even being evaluated when we were in Bahia. I guess I knew that it could be, but I wasn't at all worried that I was not

doing a good job, and I didn't have anybody asking me to do things which they couldn't ask you to do after '72. We didn't have any of that, that problem didn't exist, partly because you had so many servants. And perhaps because the person who was doing the most entertaining relied on her private industry friends — third country people. Her buddy used to help her and she didn't regard me as a buddy, or anybody who would be an asset, I think. So in terms of entertaining, she didn't think I would be any good so that's probably why she didn't lean on me. And after '72 I read about it and so forth but it never had really affected me and by the time I got to Montevideo it was sort of all in place. Of course, my reaction to it was that it was too bad, I felt I would rather be rated. I would rather have some role to play. I had heard of terrible abuses — people who outranked others asking them to do all kinds of stupid things you wouldn't want to do. But I definitely felt that people should have something to do and be asked to participate.

Q: I think that's interesting that you who had had your own career would have liked to be included in your husband's...

SANDIN: Yes, definitely. I definitely felt we were all in the same cause, and were working for it, and people who didn't have enough to do were usually not happy at the post. I mean, you would think the American woman when she goes overseas and has servants and so forth would be happy. But my observation of private industry women in Sao Paulo and other places, is that that is not always the case.

Q: It's partly because they don't know how to manage a household.

SANDIN: It's tough managing a household, and the things they might like to do, they don't have the language to do with. In many countries you can't get far without the native language.

Q: And, of course, the resources may not be available for what they're interested in doing too.

SANDIN: That too, but where people would say, “Well, I don't want to make brownies, or something...” Why don't they make brownies? They don't have anything else to do.

Q: That's exactly what my husband always said.

SANDIN: But you see this time and time again.

Q: He said, “What would you have been doing in Sierra Leone if you hadn't been a part of the Embassy in that manner?” And he's right to a certain extent.

SANDIN: Of course. What is nice now is that there's more effort to employ the spouses in the embassies. This I think is really good because it gives people a knowledge of what's going on in the community. And also, I think, in many posts the wife entertained, did a lot of representation — at whatever level you were, you used to do a lot of representation. I think there's less of that now. Certainly if you go to a big city like Sao Paulo you might as well be in New York as far as social life. Except for the Consul General, it's not a big factor.

Q: Part of that might be because there is so much else to do there that you're not thrown on each others resources for what you're going to do on the weekend.

SANDIN: Well, it's like I used to say, everybody scatters after work in Washington, and at some of these big posts they tend to scatter too.

Q: The women need things to do.

SANDIN: They need something to do, so if they're working in the embassies and the consulates then they're constantly aware of the mission, and that helps them represent the country better. And also my own daughter benefitted from the youth summer employment program. She had a wonderful time when she was a rising eighth grader, and quite bilingual, by answering the phones during the lunch hour, and helping to deliver the mail around the Consulate. She loved that. She didn't mind at all.

Q: You were in Sao Paulo just about the same time we were in Recife so you were there with the Arnolds?

SANDIN: Right. Terry Arnold was succeeded by Jack Leary, and the Ambassador when we got there was Sayre, and he was succeeded by Tony Motley, and we left about the time the Motleys left.

Q: In Montevideo you were involved with the commissary. You said that was a lot of fun. Of course, that was just your field really — products and commodities.

SANDIN: It was fun just knowing people — you had to decide how many cans of tomato soup can you sell versus how many cans of mushroom soup. And you had to know well ahead because you had to order so far ahead. And I tried to order things... I knew people would like the American lunch boxes. The American lunch boxes were expensive but I knew we had enough kids to sell a case of 15 of them. And people really appreciated the little efforts I made to order this or that, something different — I'd always have something different. I had to survey the cigarette smokers to find out what kind of low tars were coming in they might like, but nobody knew because nobody had been around. So I found an article in the Wall Street Journal that said what the best selling brands were, and I ordered those.

Q: That was in your field. It must have been great fun.

SANDIN: It was a lot of fun. Then I got a better offer I couldn't refuse. I was on the beach one day in Montevideo and I walked up to a woman who looked American — or maybe she was even speaking English to her child — and we talked, and within a few weeks she asked me if I ever did translating. I said I never had, but I'd done a lot of writing. And she said, “My husband is in charge of the International Labor Organization office here in Montevideo and he really needs another assistant to work on projects, and to do some translating.” She said, “I would be perfect for it, but I'm his wife so I'm not allowed to be

employed by him, so why don't you go?” And I worked for about year there, and that's how I got into translating — just a chance encounter on the beach. So I had to give up the commissary to this other, although they were both part time. Had I not had children, and had a better maid situation — the maids were always failing to come back from their weekends — I probably could have done them both. I hated to give up the commissary but this other proved to be my ticket into translating.

Q: I was going to ask — you must really have a great language ability because you learned Portuguese in Portugal, and Spanish in Caracas.

SANDIN: I had some courses in Spanish but I didn't have much formal education in Portuguese. And I didn't know that I had any talent for languages. When I was in college I just got by — had qualified in French from high school, which was all that was taught in our high school, French and Latin. So, forget languages was my policy. So I didn't know until I started studying languages to speak them that I apparently had some aptitude. I don't have a good accent, but I learn the language quickly.

My father came down to visit us in Sao Paulo, which is a pretty advanced place. As far as hardships, there aren't any really. Even so, he said, “It's just amazing the things you just accept.” And I didn't think I was a very accepting person, as soon as something breaks down at home, I want it fixed — I'm going to arrange for it to be fixed. And when the water would fail in Bahia, I used to get kind of exercised about it...

Q: There wasn't much you could do.

SANDIN: You couldn't do anything about it, but as soon as I determined there wasn't anything I could do, fine. But if there was anything I could do I would try to do it. But there's something that happens when you know you're going to a foreign culture, and you know you're going to be there. You tend to go out and learn quickly how things are.

Q: And you have a tendency to go along with the way things were there because there was no point in getting all exercised when there was no water in Recife, for instance. Because it would come back on eventually.

SANDIN: If you knew you were going to go home every year like the private industry people do, I really don't think they settle in as much. They think of themselves as spending nine months... and they really don't learn the road signs, and things like that right away. I remember in The Hague thinking, “Well, I've got to remember this, this means that, and I'm going to need to know this.” If you were a tourist, you could get by without this information, and if you're going for a very short term, I think you think of yourself as a tourist.

Q: What did you do in Sao Paulo? Did you do any translating there?

SANDIN: Oh, in Sao Paulo I ran up against this new business of foreign governments are supposed to allow spouses of diplomats to work.

Q: Oh, it's the same thing Beth High was going through at the same time [Beth High, spouse of the Deputy Chief of Mission in Brasilia, worked as a full time volunteer therapist for several years during her tour in Brazil. The Brazilian officials granted her a work permit about six weeks before the Highs were transferred].

SANDIN: Right. It was the same time, we were going through the same thing. I was there in Sao Paulo a few months, and I thought I should be doing some freelance translating. So I trotted down to the American Chamber of Commerce. They told me they couldn't put an ad in their newsletter because I was only looking for part time work and the ads were all for full time work. But they said, “Go over to this law firm. They've been after us for quite a while. They want a native American or British to do translating there.” So I walked in and I took their test, and they loved me, and so forth. And I said, “Look, there is a procedure in place. I'm sure I can get my work permit.” So they hired me — this is a high powered law firm, if they couldn't get it for me, nobody could. I didn't get anywhere with the

visa thing, and I think the reason the Brazilian government used, which might have been true now that I know a lot about Brazilian labor law — they could not prove that I had the educational background to be a translator. I had never studied translation.

Q: So that gave them an out.

SANDIN: That gave them an out. The fact that the law firm wanted me was not enough. I really didn't have the professional qualifications on paper. So that was the out they used. But the owner of the firm said, “Oh, well, we're still going to keep you.” He paid me cash out of his pocket every month. Somebody else pointed out to me much later, and I didn't realize, he was undoubtedly paying income tax on it before he had to give it to me! I stayed with them for almost four years.

Q: It was probably worth it to him.

SANDIN: He was very keen on me, and I proved to be enthusiastic, and all those good things. So I worked half days and we really worked hard there. We put out a lot of translating work, so I learned to work fast, and also to work accurately, and I learned a lot about Brazilian law.

So that's the basis for my career today which I continually thank this nice gentleman for. In fact, I was there in April and thanked him again. I said, “Thanks for giving me the chance.”

Q: Fantastic. So you're working and your husband is retired?

SANDIN: Right. Now I'm working three days a week here. I was lucky again, only by chance when I was doing contract translating for State, just by chance they found out that I was willing to work here in the Department, but I wasn't willing to work full time. At that point they were willing to hire somebody for just three days a week. Now they probably wouldn't do it. But I got in and they even urged me to take this test from Spanish. They give tests here, I had to take the Portuguese to English. It was hard and I thought I failed

it but it turned out I apparently passed with flying colors, But nobody remembered to tell me for about four weeks. Everybody thought everybody else had told me. Then they urged me to take the Spanish. I didn't know that they had in the back of their mind offering me a job, But you have to know two languages to be hired, so I had to take the Spanish. And then they hired me for three days a week, But I keep up a freelance business too because I didn't want to come downtown five days a week. I still have one kid at home. So again, I have the best of both worlds, and it came about by being in the right place at the right time. So I feel very lucky, I really do.

Q: I think you're being modest because I think it's your qualifications too, and your ability has a great deal to do with it. [Is] your husband working at all, or is he a support system for you now?

SANDIN: He's a support system during the week, and on the weekends he works for USIA in the press file that they send out — any breaking news stories they send out to the foreign posts during the weekend because they found out that newspapers overseas want these stories seven days a week. So they hired three or four retired officers to do this. So it's ideal for him.

Q: He's keeping his hand in.

SANDIN: He's keeping his hand in and during the week he's doing a lot of the errand running, and dish washing and stuff because I do put in quite a few hours a week on freelance work too. Well, here we are both older than we should be for putting kids through college. We should be saving our money for our retirement, or being out on the golf course by now. But since we got a late start we have to finance the kids through their expensive years.

Q: So you're helping do that.

SANDIN: So that means that I accept whatever assignments I can get. Whenever I get in translation, I never turn anything down, and fit it in somehow and the other stuff somehow goes along.

Q: But it's nice that he's willing to do the support system, otherwise it would be an awful burden for you, wouldn't it?

SANDIN: Yes, it would be because I like to have a clean house, and I like to have the laundry done regularly, that sort of thing, and things fixed, and going to the dry cleaning, the bank and post office. So I would be very much under pressure — I couldn't say, “To heck with the house. I'm going up to my little ivory tower.” So I would really be pushed if it weren't for him. He's always been very supportive of everything I did. He was always very proud of the jobs I had in Caracas, and anything else. So he's always been supportive, which is good. I guess a lot of people don't have that. He wouldn't have minded if we'd been a tandem couple at all, had that existed at that time. The other thing that worked against my wanting to continue working, I think, after I got married was that by then I was already probably 29 or 30, and if we were going to have children, I didn't want to be spreading myself too thin. I always found something to do.

Q: I was just going to say, you always found something to do with the children.

SANDIN: In Bahia I worked for an American Society which was getting organized. Shopping was the big effort there. I mean life in Bahia required — as you remember from Recife — if you wanted to go shopping you had to go to every store to fill out your whole list because there are always shortages.

Q: Absolutely.

SANDIN: I used to take a Danish friend of mine — we had a lot of third country people there, it was a nice community — we used to go to fashion shows which was the thing to go to, and we did some charity work in connection with UNITAS, the joint Brazilian/U.S.

Navy fleet visits. We distributed basketballs to orphanages, and tickets to the Holiday on Ice — we filled the stadium with kids from different orphanages. And there again, knowing the language was a big factor.

Q: I was just going to ask you if you did any traditional spouse things, and you just told me that you did in Bahia.

SANDIN: I did in Bahia. And in Montevideo I did in the sense that I was involved in the commissary. But by then I guess there weren't as many of these hail and farewell parties which in the old days took up a lot of time and which were very valuable. So as I remember it, I don't think we had as close a community as I remember The Hague. The Hague community was wonderful, The Hague embassy people were great. It was very nicely closely knit, and that was because every section made an effort to get to know everybody else. Anybody new, at whatever level, was invited and given many chances.

Q: That's a nice size embassy. It's not too large.

SANDIN: It was, and it's probably the same size now. In Uruguay the embassy was a nice size too but for some reason I don't remember there being the sense of community quite that there was in The Hague. But it could be because of the passage of time, and I definitely think there weren't very many of these welcoming parties, and goodbye parties like mission-wide parties for whoever was new that month. They weren't doing that in Montevideo, and I think...

Q: I think that's universal because we went back to Rotterdam — we were Rotterdam in 1958 for two years then we went back in '73 and we were there from September until December before anyone invited us to dinner.

SANDIN: It's just the way things have gone.

Q: And I didn't really think anything of it because... I picked up the phone after 15 years and called Dutch friends. You couldn't do that in every country but in Holland you could. And yes, we'd arrange a bridge game, or something. So it really didn't make an impression on me — as big an impression as it would have if I had been there without knowing anyone, and knowing my way around.

SANDIN: All you need to spoil this whole system that used to exist is to have one or two section wives who won't go along with it. I'm willing to even meet people at the airport — I understand there are people not even being met at the airport, even in some smaller posts.

Q: That's something a CLO can do now.

SANDIN: I think the CLO is a great help.

Q: Well, the CLO has institutionalized what we used to do as volunteers.

SANDIN: Right. And it just makes sure that its somebody's job to do it, so it definitely is going to get done.

Q: That works two ways too. Because the CLO is being paid to do it, there are wives that won't do it as volunteers.

SANDIN: Yes, that's right.

Q: It's good that it's institutionalized.

SANDIN: It's really important to get the new people; to guide them through those first weeks.

Q: Because I think that makes a difference in their attitude.

SANDIN: Because otherwise if they get jaundiced about the whole place, it doesn't work so well. And then you know everybody and feel a part of the community. I'm not very skilled at interpersonal relations by any means, But I can see that makes a big difference.

Q: I wouldn't say that. You keep telling me that, and I keep looking for signs of it, and don't see it. I think you're just very modest.

SANDIN: I have a friend in one post — she has hardly gone over to the embassy at all, and I thought, “Gee, how could you be there a couple of months and hardly know where the mail box is.”

Q: That's a little sad too, really.

SANDIN: And she was somebody I shared a career with in the early days. Oh, that was funny. Somebody who met us both, a young woman of a tandem couple was talking to us both...

Q: Recently?

SANDIN: Recently. And she was amazed to find out that we'd been co-workers in the Labor Department years ago. She couldn't believe... she knew my friend better than she knew me, But she just didn't realize that there would be some women who are not working now, But who in the past, had had a career. She was quite impressed that we still kept up with each other, that this particular woman was an economist. She had had no idea this woman was an economist, and I suppose she thought, “Why the heck did she give it up?” But in those days you did. So the younger woman, I think, was quite impressed with this. I mean it raised my friend a few notches in the young woman's eyes. It was funny to realize that much time has passed.

Q: It seems to me that in your early years you were so interested in what you were doing, and so well qualified and everything, that you really sort of breezed through, not totally aware of all of the little resentments, and office politics.

SANDIN: I sure wasn't aware of that.

Q: It didn't affect you.

SANDIN: I wasn't looking for it. I guess I was naive and thought that everybody was.

Q: But that must have been so refreshing to the people you worked with really.

SANDIN: They once or twice had a sharp word for me. I was too defensive when the subjects would come up, I guess they thought I was too defensive, to eager to say “We did this because...”

Q: It was just that you had all the information and you wanted to transmit it to them, I think.

SANDIN: I just wasn't looking for the politics because in my first job — when I first started with the Labor Department, I really don't think there was a lot of politics. We were all involved in one project, and we were all being sent to different places, and I was just so impressed when I first came to Washington with people talking about what I considered were important issues, and really doing something. I wasn't aware they probably were also trying to jockey for higher positions. And even now I hear from people about cutthroat competition among officers, and I didn't see it. I remember in Montevideo one of the secretaries was telling me that, and she thought it was terrible. And then I did later see what was happening to a couple of people that I thought were probably good officers. I did see the effect of politics happening but I never have been one to look for that. So it's fortunate that I didn't. I think I went out of my way to look for things to do in Holland. There were things to attend and I attended them.

Q: How about filling in at the Ambassador's dinner?

SANDIN: Oh, that's right. I forgot. I'm glad you mentioned it. Oh, it was awful.

Q: When you said you had no car and couldn't get in.

SANDIN: There was a new language course, it's a total immersion type course and they thought I'd be a good candidate to try this course out on, to use it on future officers. So I went out to a beach resort, not too far from The Hague — unfortunately during a very rainy summer — and I was in this course.

Q: Was that Noordwijk aan Zee, or...

SANDIN: Noordwijk, yes. I was in a class with a few Turks, and a few Canadians, and a French or two, and I came back to the embassy one day to check the mail or something. (End of Tape 1, Side A)

William Tyler was the Ambassador to Holland then, he hadn't been there too long, I think he was an appointee of Kennedy and had worked in some high position in the State Department before, so he was a career Ambassador. He called on me, and said, “En principe,” (which I didn't know what that meant) “would you be able to come to dinner at the residence next week?” And I didn't answer right away... I said, “Gee, I guess so, But I'm out at Noordwijk, I don't have any way of getting in to the city.” “Oh, we'll send a car for you.” And I realized much, much later that when the Ambassador says “come” you say, “Of course, sir,” and you work out your own arrangements afterwards, But of course I didn't realize...

Q: Oh, I love your naivete. It's wonderful, it works.

SANDIN: He didn't take offense. I'm sure he knew... and it was perfectly true that I didn't know how I was going to get in from out there. I was supposed to be immersed in this

course, and I wasn't counting on coming back to The Hague. But the dinner itself was extremely formal and luckily I'd been raised in reasonably cultured surroundings, I knew what fork to use and so forth. But I was just nervous, and Mrs. Tyler was extremely formal. She was more British than American, in fact, I think she was British, and I think she owned vineyards in France, and so did he. It was definitely old-line, and it was a small group. After we got up from the dinner table she said, “Shall we retire,” or something like that. She meant go into the living room and leave the men to themselves. I thought she wanted to know if anybody wanted to use the rest room or something. But I guess I followed suit. I knew enough not to sit on the right hand end of the sofa, that I did know. Then I think at one point I spilled a little cognac on this dress I was wearing because my hand was shaking. I suppose people noticed but nobody commented on it, of course. Other than that I probably got through it pretty well.

I know there are a lot of delightful Ambassadors' wives, and some real American types. Well, I didn't have any; they were almost always foreigners with a different background. I can see why each Ambassador's wife would be a challenge to every officer, because in Mrs. Tyler's case she probably was only liked by the women who were European, and there were a lot of wives who were European. She just probably thought Americans were too informal. In Caracas, Mrs. Bernbaum had a habit of knitting at every public ceremony she went to with her husband. I guess the Latins didn't care much for that but her attitude was, so what. And Mrs. Siracusa, in Montevideo — I had these beautiful earrings — she asked in a reception line if they were really IUDs! She thought that I had earrings made of IUDs, to be a feminist, I guess, or something.

Q: In a reception line she asked you...

SANDIN: Yes! I don't think there were any local officials there, perhaps it might have been just women coming over for coffee. I don't remember the occasion. I mean she would say... she was outspoken in all kinds of ways. I was just as glad I didn't have to deal with some of these people on a close daily basis. She was really only there at the beginning

of the tour. And we had the U.S. Bicentennial in Montevideo — and we had quite a bit of community cohesiveness.

In the Netherlands, going back to that, I got through that first dinner. The other woman on the diplomatic list was the Labor Attach#, an older woman, and she, I guess, was included in quite a few things. But another time somebody came from the State Department, he was a Deputy Assistant Secretary, or an Under Secretary for something, and for some reason they were going to discuss the future of Indonesia which was pretty pertinent in 1965, and they had a dinner in the upstairs room of the Des Indes, a hotel restaurant. And for some reason the Dutch officials were bringing their wives so this official from the State Department needed to have a female companion to match up the tables, so I went. I really enjoyed it because they were discussing some of the things at the table which were real policy, and I thought, “All these people are really getting somewhere, and they're going to accomplish something, they're saying intelligent things.” I guess lots of it took place when the women had left — you know, the women and men separate after dinner and the men smoke cigars, and women talk. So a lot of it took place then. But the occasion was a high point. But by then I wasn't nervous about this at all.

Q: You'd been through it.

SANDIN: And I knew the language, and I knew my way around. But that was a good point about being a woman on the diplomatic list. Now when you don't have to match up tables anymore, that probably isn't an advantage. There were things that you had to go to.

Q: I do think that your fresh... naive is not really the right word maybe, But just uninvolved approach. You were there to do a job, and you knew what the job was, and you were in a fun situation.

SANDIN: And I wasn't trying to compete.

Q: And you weren't trying to compete, or you weren't after someone else's job.

SANDIN: I have to give credit — my boss in The Hague was really great. Lou Smith and his wife were always very good to every newcomer.

Q: Is that L-O-U, or L-E-W?

SANDIN: L-O-U — Louis M. Smith, Jr. His wife's name was Sue. They retired to North Carolina. I suppose he might even be deceased now. I often thought I should write to him after all these years. Anyway, they were delightful people. And the other Assistant Agriculture Attach# was a single man from Texas, which I guess gave some people a chance to wonder — you know, single officers, one man, one female. Why didn't they get together, or something? But he was a confirmed bachelor. There were several single people in The Hague, and we all went touring together and that was another thing that helped because that was a bad place for single persons. It was what they call a family post.

Q: Very much so.

SANDIN: So there were three or four single people, one of whom I'm still in correspondence with. And I had very good Dutch neighbors, they sort of took me under their wing, an older couple. So a lot of things I learned about Dutch culture, I learned from them. But I did have an unfortunate time early in my stay there when I dated a local employee in the Embassy. That was frowned on. No one ever told me it would be, you know. A clerk from Budget & Fiscal, a nice looking Dutch fellow — not younger than I am or anything but that was a... Then he thought we could still date if he wasn't working at the embassy anymore. So he left the embassy. He was real upset when I said we couldn't continue dating.

Q: Were you told by the embassy?

SANDIN: I guess I was told by my boss, or I came to realize it myself.

Q: Even after he wasn't working at the...

SANDIN: Right. He wasn't the right social class. In Holland that matters, or my boss thought it could.

Q: Well you said in Caracas too that your boss introduced you to some people to make sure you would be dating the right type.

SANDIN: My boss definitely wanted me to meet my future husband. I think he thought he might even get rid of me that way.

Q: Oh, that was not the help that you...

SANDIN: Actually I think it was to make sure I had somebody to go out with probably. But he didn't tell me the fellow was single. I still remember when we had lunch together thinking that my future husband was not single, we were just going out to lunch...

Q: You're so refreshing.

SANDIN: My husband meanwhile had been single for a long time. Years ago he lived in Mexico and he almost married a Mexican girl but after that he decided he was going to be in the Foreign Service he shouldn't marry a foreigner. For some reason he really wanted to marry another American, But I guess he just hadn't met...

Q: Because he was always overseas and there weren't women officers abroad in those days.

SANDIN: I guess he thought it was better to marry an American than to try to bring a foreigner into the American Foreign Service.

Q: How old is he now? Is he older than you?

SANDIN: Yes, he's just turned 65.

Q: So he's considerably older than you.

SANDIN: A lot older than I am — 13 or 12 years older than I am. But he didn't look it, and he'd never been married so his family was glad to see him get married. My family was probably glad to see me get married in those days.

Q: Tell me about your father's book that you said is coming out as a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate. How exciting.

SANDIN: Yes. It's Blueprints For Memory. He's been teaching memory by association in memory systems as a hobby, as an avocation for many years. He's traveled a lot, he's given courses to civil servants. He even gave a course in Brazil when I went down there to see him. He wrote a book about improving your memory about 20 years ago, But this is a much better book. My mother did a lot of the editing, and that's one reason it's a better book.

Q: Well, let me know when it comes out because I could use it, believe me.

SANDIN: It's a thin book fortunately, and its got a lot of tricks for memory including a number code for memory, real systems for memorizing specific things.

Q: That's something that the OBC might be interested in because we need to remember faces, and names especially in a foreign language. I always found it harder to remember — harder to remember what I read in the newspapers in French, or Dutch, or whatever.

SANDIN: Oh, it is, and of course the foreigners don't introduce themselves well like Americans do. They mumble their names.

Q: Or no name at all.

SANDIN: They mumble their last names, if anything. While the memory experts tell you to confirm it by repeating it yourself, or saying...

Q: And then immediately associating...

SANDIN: Yes, just doing that leaves it in your mind better. I don't know how you can always do that. And it's possible when they say the name you won't get it anyway.

Q: I've always thought that living in Sri Lanka, would have been something else again with all of those difficult names — seemingly difficult because I don't know anything about them.

SANDIN: I see these lists of officials that the government puts out; lists of officials in different countries, I wonder how people ever manage. The Muslim names, for example.

Q: How nice for your father to sort of cap his career with this. It's great.

SANDIN: My kids enjoyed the Foreign Service. My theory with that is to take the kids out early into the Foreign Service but once you come back to the States if they're in junior high or high school, you almost can't go out again. If you take them out early, and keep them in foreign schools — the American schools overseas — they'll accept that as normal and they'll be happy in it. But if you bring them back and throw them into all the American activities they have never been in before, then it's going to be hard to take them out again. And yet you find people worrying about, “Will my child do well in the first grade if she doesn't go to school in America for her first grade?” I say, “To heck with it, send them to the first grade, bring them back for the eighth and upward.” That's when they really need it.

Q: Exactly.

SANDIN: Take them while they're little, go because you have built-in babysitters and everything like that. Don't worry about whether they get general science and a gifted

level fourth grade or not. My daughter keeps that poem that was published quite a few times in the State Department magazine about Sears, and Penney's clothing, versus the designer clothing. Something about new children in the American schools overseas. She said that's so true, because I guess she went to school with a lot of kids of private industry parents who go back every year and bring back all the Jordache and Reeboks and we have everything from the Sears catalogue, or the Penney's catalogue.

Which is another aspect of the experience in Sao Paulo where there is an excellent school. My kids were classmates of people they wouldn't meet in the States necessarily — children of high-ranking officials of General Motors and that sort of thing. So that was an introduction to another aspect of American life that she might not necessarily get — whatever that might be worth.

Q: One of my friends who is in Sao Paulo said that you can always tell a Foreign Service wife — she has real jewelry and homemade clothes. So that's the equivalent of the children with their Sears and Penny's.

SANDIN: Some people don't know how to dress. When we came back on a cruise ship to Sao Paulo, there were some Americans on the cruise ship who weren't sure I was American because of the way I was dressed although I bought all my clothes in the U.S. Because my daughter and I immediately learned what kind of clothes looked too American in Latin America, and we just didn't buy them. I couldn't believe that a high ranking wife in the Sao Paulo community would wear a cotton bathing suit with blue and white checks with “little-boy-shorts” legs. I never wore a bikini but I tried to wear stylish one-piece suits. A lot of people, I thought, just didn't make any allowances for what foreigners expect a well dressed person to wear. Part of this is our American practicality. If the dress is still good, why not wear it. We say “Certainly this pocketbook was bought 15 years ago but I still like it and it may be way out of style, But it's a good pocketbook. You can't just throw it away and get another one.”

Q: Part of that may be defiance of a culture they couldn't quite accept.

SANDIN: That could be. I think a lot of it was they just weren't going to be foolish and follow fashion, But people we're dealing with in other countries do follow fashion. This doesn't mean you have to get everything new, But you should really look at your wardrobe with a jaundiced eye and say, “That is too American.” “That is too much unlike what other people are wearing.”

I've tried to include in some newcomers guides I might have written, or some Post Reports, I've tried to explain that American men's sport coats are just never seen in Latin America, maybe the blazers, But certainly not the plaids and not the green pants, and the rust colored pants and that sort of thing. And certain other things, American shirtwaist dresses never used to be seen, no peter Pan collars, no basket handbags. We became very aware of it. I hardly buy any clothes overseas. But we'd go through the American stores and say, “No, that's too American, that's too American,” and we wouldn't buy it, we'd select something else.

Q: You were adopting local camouflage, local colorations so that you didn't stand out in the community.

SANDIN: I had to walk through Sao Paulo center every day to work and I guess I walk too fast to be attacked by purse snatchers. Once I did have a chain taken off my neck but it was a costume jewelry chain. But I realized that I must have stood out — well, short hair, light skin. In Sao Paulo we had to dress up for work. But I really realize now that I still was probably kind of dowdy. I didn't have a real sense of style even then.

Q: I thought it was a shame that the Brazilian women didn't wear their own lovely semi-precious stones. At least in Recife it wasn't chic to wear their lovely stones, you were supposed to be dripping with gold. Maybe Bahia was the same way — very large print

dresses on small rather round women, and nail polish one color, lipstick another color, toenail polish another color.

SANDIN: That was probably just in Recife because I was chided in Brasilia for telling a manicurist — she was changing the colors of my fingers... yes. But don't bother with the feet, “Oh, but you can't have toes and finger nails not match.” We used to notice how the missionaries often wore their hair in styles which were easy to pick out because they had the bubble teased haircuts of the '60s. When they made clothes, they thought in terms of what had been in fashion when they were last in the States, which in many cases was quite a few years before. But people didn't mind — missionaries were expected to dress strangely but diplomats, I guess, should try to dress differently. And, of course, they attach a lot of importance to clothes, and a lot of Americans think that's too frivolous.

Q: That was one of the troubles I knew I would have when I went down to Brazil when we were assigned there, because I always wear casual shirtwaists. I said, “I know they're not going to like the way I look.” And I went with silk pants, and there were times in Recife when I would be the only woman in an evening pants suit, the only woman on the floor talking to the men. I refused to paste myself into a chair around the edge and sit and talk about babies to the woman on my left, and diets to the woman on my right.

SANDIN: But they accept a lot of that from foreigners.

Q: Yes, I was fortunate.

SANDIN: And you probably had things they recognized were nice clothes even if they weren't the styles they liked. The combinations some people of the lower levels came up with were of obvious cheapness, or homemade, and coupled with lack of style was just too much probably.

Oh, yes. In the wives' course I learned, which I had already learned from other sources, that American women don't put out enough food sometimes when they're entertaining;

that in most other cultures they like to see a lot of food out. They want to feel that they can eat all they want and that you're not being the least bit stingy. That was brought to mind because someone who is employing a maid that I know here in the States is rationing her food. And I know a friend of mine in Montevideo lost a maid because she wasn't providing enough food. She said, “Well, we're providing the same thing we eat.” I said, “Yes, Julie, But I know in your household if all the hamburgers aren't eaten at lunch, they are going to reappear at dinner.” I mean you've got everything more or less, as the Brazilians say “counted out”. You figure out how much people are going to eat and you're only going to cook that much, and that doesn't go in Latin America. It doesn't go with your maids, it doesn't go with your foreign guests. When I gave a party for the Uruguayan employees, it was a buffet, and I put this, this, and this — a Christmas party or something — “Well, now I think that is enough, but I better put out two or three more things to make sure it's enough.” And didn't I hear afterwards it wasn't at all like a gringo party, it was great, there was plenty of food! That's one of the things that people ought to realize, too.

I remember someone once gave that in a wives' course, and somebody said, “What do you do with the extra food?” She said, “You freeze it and eat it later as a family, or in some houses you have so many servants that you have to start parceling it out.” But that's another thing that goes against the grain of a lot of Americans — waste not, want not, and the same thing goes with clothes. I think it is one thing that a lot of people have to be made aware of before they go overseas, they may run into this.

Q: That's part of transporting overseas our very practical American approach to things, and just not quite being able to adapt. And I think that can make people very unhappy, don't you?

SANDIN: I think so, and certainly there are a lot of people are unhappy overseas.

Q: Do you think there are now?

SANDIN: The ones that are unhappy, I think, are the single secretaries. I think they are still unhappy. I think the wives may be finding more ways to occupy themselves, and they're more aware perhaps that they might be unhappy, so it doesn't come as a surprise to them. But I think it's unfortunate that the single secretaries, and the Marine Guards of course in many posts, have a real lack of social life. Those are the people that I find so left out.

Q: The one thing that I forgot to ask you was that you said you were a product of the Eisenhower years.

SANDIN: They always said the Eisenhower generation — we didn't protest, we didn't lobby for our rights as women, we didn't get involved in causes. So perhaps that's why I didn't resist when the Ambassador had to approve my continuing to work in Caracas and probably that's one reason it didn't bother me. Because I accepted things, that's the way they were. It's still the old line of doing things. If the higher ups said “no,” well, that's it.

Q: There's an article on the deceptive decade, which is the '50s, and it said the general impression of that era was that it was dulls-ville. And the author said it wasn't at all. He said that was the last time that we had confidence, prosperity. He said the decade of the '50s was the time when television was taking over, when we were building homes, we had optimism after the depression and the war, and we were building homes, about 15 million housing units were built in the decade which was almost a third of the nation's total housing starts at that time.

SANDIN: I remember he was sure things were going to get better.

Q: Yes, exactly, that's what he said. He also said that Eisenhower set the tone too. He was brought up in a time of comparative scarcity, spent most of his adult life in a military establishment that was poor, and he never lost the inhibitions that such experiences breed. So he was a cautious man in an era of goodwill, and I think a lot of that was passed on. I was fascinated to find that just before coming to talk to you.

SANDIN: That's interesting to see that they show the sitcoms again, and that sort of thing. The mothers were always wearing skirts, dresses, and probably nylons. Incredible.

***

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Robert B. Sandin

Spouse Entered Service:1962Left Service:1986You Entered Service:1965 (self)Left Service:19681968 (as spouse)1986

Status: Spouse of retiree, also as former employee of Department of Agriculture overseas

Posts: Self: 6/65-8/67The Hague, Netherlands 11/67-8/68Caracas, Venezuela

As Spouse 11/68-1/72Salvador, Bahia, Brazil 1/72-6/75Washington, DC 6/75-7/79Montevideo, Uruguay 8/79-8/83Sao Paulo, Brazil

Spouse's Position: USIS Press Officer

Date and Place of birth: January 27, 1939; Winthrop, MassachusettsMaiden Name: Donna Lee Hersey

Parents (Name, Profession):

William D. Hersey, retired investment salesman, active writer,speaker on memory improvement

Fairles T. Hersey, retired journalist and teacher of mentally retarded

Schools (Prep, University):

Public schools Norton, Massachusetts

BA magna cum laude from Jackson College, Tufts

Date and Place of Marriage: Medford, Massachusetts; 3/30/68

Profession: Translator, Portuguese and Spanish - State Department, free lance

Children:

Sheila C. Sandin, 20, student at University of Virginia

Craig W. Sandin, 16, student at South Lakes High School, Reston

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:A. At Post: While in Salvador, Bahia, worked hard on organizing American community association, active in the International Women's Club, wrote a visitor's guide. While in Montevideo, reorganized commissary product list, served as translator for an international organization, wrote shopping guide as a volunteer. In Sao Paulo, served on commissary board, worked part time (paid) for a Brazilian law firm. Attempted [to] establish a spousal work permit process with host government, but was unsuccessful (kept working anyway). In Sao Paulo, wrote multi-page guide to hiring, managing and dismissing domestics; also on public transportation and a guide on what to do if in a traffic accident.

At post as a single: Assistant Agricultural Attach# in The Hague and Caracas

B. In Washington, DC: Other than helping with the AAFSW Bookfair until last year (picking up books during the year), I have done nothing FS related. 1973/75 had a free lance writing job with a firm that had a contract with the Department of Commerce to produce reports on export markets. 1984-present at the State Department as a part time translator.

Honors: Graduated magna cum laude from Jackson College; Phi Beta Kappa

End of interview